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HARBOR INDEPENDENT NEWS

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TopSail Kids at the Helm

Youth Sailing Program Trains Children for Life

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What the TopSail Program is About:

Challenges that Shape Lives, Attitudes By Arthur R. Vinsel, Community News Reporter

ne summer day in 1933, a little boy clambered into a 12-foot Snowbird sailboat on what seemed a boundless bay off Balboa Island, where his family camped in a tent on a sandy, cottage-dotted beach.

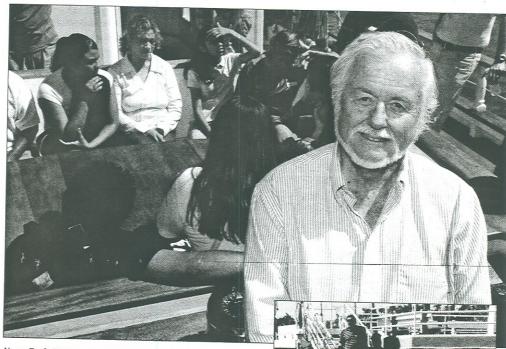
The master of the vessel, a family friend affluent enough dispite the Great Depression to summer in Newport, gave three-year old Jimmy Gladson a task. He pointed to the centerboard trunk's slot, in which fits the centerboard, a removable keel, that kept the small boat steady.

Through this opening a school of tiny hatchling fish could be seen swimming along, learning about their own watery world in the shelter of the boat's shadow.

"Your job is to watch and make sure the water doesn't start coming into the boat and sink us," the avuncular skipper teased. The toddler bent dutifully over the opening, a tiny window into the ocean, ready to sound the alarm if the bobbing boat began taking on seawater. Of course, the slotted fixture was designed so that couldn't happen, but the tot took his duty seriously.

"I kept my head bent over it the whole time. Whenever I think of that day I first became fascinated with sailing, I can still feel heat from the sunburn I got on the back of my neck," reflects Capt. Jim Gladson, 75, skipper and CEO of the Los Angeles Maritime Institute (LAMI) TopSail Youth Program.

Gladson has kept his eye on the water for seven decades since, living beside or on it, a high school science teacher-turned-life-mentor to thousands of youngsters. Some, born into L.A.'s barrios and ghettos aged 10 to 13, have never even seen the ocean until TopSail brings them here.



Above, TopSail kids on the twin brigatine the *Exy Johnson* with Captain Jim Gladson in the foreground. Right, kids walk up the gang plank to a learning adventure on the high seas. Photos: Bernard Kane.

Viewed by some as a revolutionary approach to education, the programoffered by LAMI, a nonprofit foundation begun in 1992 as an affiliate of the Los Angeles Maritime Museum-is simple in concept. But it is successful beyond Gladson's greatest hopes. It developed as an outgrowth of the 1970s creation of the first magnet campus in the Los Angeles Unified School District, the Area D Alternative School that initially met for eight weeks on the sand at Venice beach. Methods employed in establishing the school were perhaps new and liberal, but not out of line with the scholastic mood of those times. And they made immense common sense.

"The first four schools were unique

in that students, parents and staff formed a three-part governing council. They were genuinely managed by this council, including voting on school spending and the curriculum. They actually did staff hiring and firing by vote," Gladson explains.

However, to prevent a student majority from

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We Use The Sea to Train for Life'

approving a semester-long recess, for example, mathematical adjustments were developed to offset sheer weight of numbers in voting percentages. One vote by a teacher might equal 10 votes by parents or 20 votes by students. Still, it was democracy in action. It worked.

Today, he notes, the old campus that moved into a rented warehouse that took much of their LAUSD budget still functions and is known as Westside Alternative School in the Mar Vista area.

Students-kids-the self-selected volunteers for this unusual new educational concept, were instigators voungsters."

They had an idea and he had a sailboat-he still has it-the Dubloon. a gaff-headed ketch originally built by the late San Pedro activist/historian Bill Olesen, who had christened her the Lakme, a name still revered in yachting circles. Lakme is a fanciful character in an East Indian opera, a role made famous by singer Lily Pons almost a century ago. Gladson collects pre-1930 phonograph records and owns one of her singing the title song.

Where did the irrepressible Mr. Olesen come up with a name like

"He said he was always 'mightily

"To ignore all three omens would have been to court disaster," Olesen replied in his orotund verbal style.

"That was Bill," says Gladson with

So it was that the former Lakme, renamed Dubloon (an alternate spelling of the obsolete Spanish gold coin renowned in tales of pirates' booty) by Gladson, became the flagship on an educational voyage of discovery. The plan was conceived in spirit and fact by his first class of kids who began with day sails on Dubloon offshore from Cabrillo Beach.

He's been a longtime member of the Buccaneers Yacht Club, based

near Cabrillo Marina, where many fellow sailing folk became volunteers and generous TopSail donors "The kids had come



of the sailing program that became a blueprint for TopSail once Gladson took early retirement from the Los Angeles Unified School District to found the LAMI organization.

"I took early retirement so we could reach larger numbers of kids," he explains. "It took me a long time to understand the fundamental positive things that 4 were happening with these

taken' with Lily Pons' singing of that song. The Lakme also happened to have been built at the foot of Lakme Avenue, in Wilmington," Gladson explains. Olesen's own late father was also a mariner. And his Dad's first command as a sea captain was a coastal lumber schooner, also, coincidentally, named the Lakme ... "

Olesen, who died several years ago, was an epic poet at heart with a flair for the florid in his speech.

for all sorts of reasons," says Gladson. No one was assigned to our magnet or alternative school. Some were just not challenged enough. They found regular school booooorrriinnnggg! Others wanted to escape the gang activity. Others wanted to escape a

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In The Wake of **LAMI, Troubled** Kids Can. Do Blossom

By Arthur R. Vinsel Community News Reporter

A black-and-white photo poster from 1973 shows an old sailing vacht standing to off Cabrillo Beach, its crew of ebullient teens topside, one clinging to the mast pinnacle, a joyous gesture of where his life might take

That first picture of the youngsters then in a Los Angeles Unified School District's experimental magnet alternative school program-now middle aged-symbolize the spirit of the TopSail youth program that grew out of it.

> "That's Chipper, up there at the top," says Captain Jim Gladson, Executive Director of the Los Angeles Maritime Institute (LAMI), which in 1992 launched the TopSail youth sail training program. He based it on his work at a West L.A. facility where he taught for 18 of his 32 years in the school district.

Chipper, he noted was dyslexic and a disruptive hellraiser in class and around campus.

"That's Debbie there," he says, pointing to a girl. "She had a terrible time in junior high." Chipper changed through the sailing course and so did

Debbie and many others.

Gladson recalls with a wry grin on his neatly bearded face, appearing almost a stand-in for John Barrymore in that old movie "Down to the Sea in

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